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# Relationship between Athletes and Role Models

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# **Relationship between Athletes and Role Models**

Research Study

Conducted and Written by Kaytlin LeMier

November 2007

## INTRODUCTION

This study examines the relationship between athletes and their responsibility as role models to youth. The study was conducted due to the expressed debate over the expected roles of professional athletes. On one side of the debate are those who feel that athletes choose to be in the limelight, thus being an athlete requires a need to acknowledge that they are role models and it requires that they act accordingly. On the other side are those who feel that athletes may have chosen their profession, but they are entitled to have a 'private life' regardless of the youth who may or may not aspire to be like them. The issue in context with youth and the potential influence of athletes as role models lies with three main factors. The three main factors are the moral development of youth, the potential influence by athletes on the behavior of youth, and athletes seen through media as exceptions to the rules.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To decipher the essence of the expressed relationship between athletes and role models the definition of role model needs to be clarified. The use of the phrase 'role model' can be traced to psychology and sociology literature of the 1950s (Shropshire 137). According to Kenneth L. Shropshire in his contribution to *Paradoxes of Youth and Sport*, the meaning of 'role model' was rather unclear and could only be defined in the context it was used. Yet he eventually developed the interpretation that a role model is a person such as a hero or a mentor who acts as a leader to be emulated (137). According to Shropshire, paraphrasing Professor Adeno Addis, the role modeler can be emulated in two ways. The first is the Role Imitation View, which is emulation through the precise area an athlete performs in, such as the form he or she has. The second is the Comprehensive View, which is emulation of all areas that may pertain outside of the athletes' expertise (137).

The first factor in the potential influence of athletes as role models is the moral development of character of youths who are still maturing. The two main components of character development are imitation and initiation. Imitation occurs the day a child is brought into the world, while initiation begins when the conventions of growth become more complex. Robert L. Simon, a contributing author to *Sports Ethics*, defines imitation as children acting like the people who exemplify what is expected of them, and initiation as when a child begins to observe and then attempts to model a modeler (Simon 49). Jay Coakley, a contributing author to *Paradoxes of Youth and Sport*, asserts that children, especially adolescents, depend not only on moral support from athletes, but also parents, teachers, mentors, and advocates (Coakley 27). This supports the notion that it takes a community or village to raise a child.

The second factor was with respect to the potential influence by athletes on the behavior of youth. In Kieran Monaghan's book, *It's All Good. Or is it? Examining the Problems of Modern Day Youth and Sport*, he says,

Television, it seems, appears too often to revel in showing footage of mass brawls and other misdemeanors by professional athletes. In an era where many are concerned about sportsmanship, it would be better for all concerned if such footage were not shown at all. It is bad enough for those who witness such events in the flesh without transmitting the pictures to millions of others, many of whom are impressionable youth athletes (Managhan 26).

Robert L. Simon, in *Sports Ethics*, also considered the influence of the behavior of star athletes on impressionable boys and girls. Simon brought up how, in an attempt to emulate these top stars, youth are driven to use performance-enhancing drugs. This may be to please coaches, parents, and fans (Simon 178).

Last is the issue of many top sport stars being treated unequally in regard to the law. This did not hold true in one rare case. The United States Supreme Court decided that even top sports

stars did not deserve special treatment. In 1995, according to contributing author Kenneth L. Shropshire in *Paradoxes of Youth and Sport*, the Supreme Court said that athletes *should* be treated as role models (139). In that case, *Veronia School District v. Acton*, Justice Antonin Scalia wrote, “It seems to us self-evident that a drug problem largely fueled by the ‘role model’ effect of athletes’ drug use, and particular danger to athletes, is effectively addressed by making sure the athletes do not do drugs.” Essentially, the Court decided that the privacy rights against search could not be enjoyed by athletes, since the Court did not want to be seen as giving athletes preferential treatment (Shropshire 139).

By incorporating all the literature that was gathered for this research study the following research hypotheses were formulated in order to create a sufficient survey. The three main factors regarding youth, athletes and role models previously mentioned were taken into account in designing the remainder of the study.

## RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

- 1A. The majority of individuals surveyed will respond ‘yes’ to being asked if they had a role model that was an athlete when they were growing up.
- 1B. More males more than females will attest to having an athlete as their role model when they were growing up.
- 2A. The majority of individuals surveyed will agree that being a role model comes with the job, and it requires a need to both acknowledge and act accordingly.
- 2B. More females than males will agree that athletes have the responsibility expressed in hypothesis 2A, to be a role model.

3. The majority of individuals who choose to respond 'yes' to believing that athletes are seen as more of a role model to youth will also agree that athletes have a responsibility to be a role model.

## METHOD

The research was conducted during the months of October and November of 2007. The survey took place in the dormitories, faculty offices, and classrooms of a regional Midwestern University campus. The data collected was from students who met the age of consent and was obtained through the use of a simple survey. In a simple survey, participants voluntarily and anonymously express their views. See Appendix A for the survey. The students chosen in classroom settings and dormitories were selected using a convenience sample. A convenience sample is simply a selection of individuals who are surveyed un-structurally, based on their availability. Although the selected classrooms chosen to participate in the survey were predetermined and approved by the Institutional Review Board, the classroom's participants were not predetermined, but chosen by attendance. Once the surveys were completed, the data was cross analyzed between questions. This cross analysis allowed the researcher to see if participants agreed or disagreed with multiple questions in order to distinguish any patterns to interpret. The surveys of the participants who only partially completed them were thrown out of the data analysis before results were determined.

## RESULTS

The incomplete surveys that could not be analyzed to the depth needed were automatically discarded. There were 100 useable surveys, 50 completed by males and 50 completed by females. Overall, 93 percent of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 25, 3 percent between the ages of 26 and 35, as well as between the ages of 36 and 45, 1 percent

in the age group of 46 to 55, and no participants ages 56 or above. The results were analyzed using a gender anonymous method, and then using a gender differentiated method. This allowed for both types of hypotheses to be tested.

Hypothesis 1A predicted that the majority of individuals surveyed would respond 'yes' to being asked if they had a role model who was an athlete when they were growing up. It could not be claimed as being supported. In the combined analysis the division was nearly equal, 51 percent of participants responded 'yes', while 49 percent responded 'no' to having had an athlete as a role model. Hypothesis 1B predicted more males would attest to having an athlete as their role model while they were growing up. This hypothesis was supported. When the surveys were gender identified, 66 percent of males responded 'yes,' compared to only 36 percent of females.

Hypothesis 2A predicted that the majority of individuals surveyed would agree that being a role model comes with the job, and the job requires both a need to acknowledge this responsibility and act accordingly. This hypothesis was strongly supported. Of the 100 participants, 81 percent agreed. Hypothesis 2B was also supported, in that more females agreed that athletes have the responsibility expressed in Hypothesis 2A. When looking at females, 84 percent of them agreed, where as only 78 percent of males agreed. The interesting twist found in the results of the survey was the comparison between agreeing and disagreeing that athletes essentially have a responsibility to be a role model. The comparison showed that more participants agreed with both, not one or the other. In the gender anonymous analysis, 56 percent of the participants agreed with both the statements of an athlete having a responsibility as well as their entitlement to a private life and only 4 percent disagreed with both sides. Of those who did not agree or disagree with both, 25 percent agreed athletes have a responsibility to be a role model over their private life, and 15 percent sided with athletes being entitled to a private life.



As for Hypothesis 3, in which it was predicted that the majority of individuals who chose to respond ‘yes’ to believing athletes are seen as more of a role model to youth would also agree that athletes have a responsibility to be a role model, this hypothesis was supported. Eighty percent of all participants agreed that athletes have a responsibility to be a role model to youth.

## INTERPRETATION

In interpreting the results, all but one hypothesis was supported, although few were strongly supported. In a general look at the gender anonymous analysis, participants acknowledged that they had and/or have a role model. However, when looking at the role model being an athlete, far more participants acknowledged it was when they were younger opposed to now. An interpretation of this result may be that as children and youth grow older their role models change to better suit their aspirations. A child can have Michael Jordan as his role model, but perhaps when he grows older his role model becomes a History Teacher to represent a career goal he has.

The males prevailed over the females in recognizing athletes as their childhood role models. This could be attributed to the male dominance in sports, or more specifically the male dominance in publicized sports. According to a study done by Terry Adams and C.A. Tuggle on *ESPN's SportsCenter and Coverage of Women's Athletics*, research showed “the level of women's involvement in sports is not reflected in the amount of coverage devoted to it” (247).

The results of Hypothesis 2B, which predicted that more females would agree that athletes had a responsibility to be role models, could be the result of a female stereotype. This stereotype is that females are more concerned that young adults look up to respectable figures, since they carry the nurturing trait. Nevertheless, the results did show more equality than

predicted between males and females on this issue. This could also mean that both males and females know the influence that athletes can have on the younger audience.

The interesting part of the results was the fact that participants did not only choose one side on the level of athletes' responsibility. The attempt to force participants to choose a side about whether the athlete has a responsibility to be a role model or is entitled to their private life essentially backfired. This could be attributed to the participants' propensity to envision gray area. More participants may have envisioned specific situations where one applied and other situations where another could apply, causing gray area. This could have resulted in a choice on the participants behalf that their decision depended on the situation itself. Since an option was not given for that decision, they may have agreed with both statements.

As for the last hypothesis, the results showed that the majority of those who believed that athletes should be role models to youth also believed that athletes had a responsibility to be role models. The question was posed since 'should' and 'essentially obligated' have two very different meanings. Just because a person should do something does not necessarily mean they are obligated to. The results show that the majority of those who participated believed that if one was true then the other must be true. This may be linked to the participants' lack of differentiation between the two meanings of the terms.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study unraveled the posed questions about the expressed views of the relationship between athletes and role models. The results and interpretation show that both male and female participants acknowledged an athlete role model while growing up. It also brought up an unexpected answer to what athletes are expected to do when they choose their career. Results showed that 80 percent of all participants, 93 percent of whom were between the ages of 18 and

25, expressed a gray area in their decision. Eighty percent of participants felt that athletes had a responsibility to be mindful of their actions, but that they were also entitled to a private life. The difficulty in this gray area is determining where the line is drawn concerning how much private life they are entitled to when nearly all emulated athletes' actions and choices are publicized through the media. The research answered the posed questions, yet also posed many more questions for further research.

## LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The limitations met during this research study were initially encountered in the literature review section. The objective of the study was based around what both male and female participants felt about the relationship between athletes and role models, but also the views each gender had. Very little research or literature contains information pertaining to what specifically males or females feel about the issue of athletes and role models. The second limitation met during the surveying process was the ability to survey participants outside of the age range of 18 to 25 years old. Features and tools were available to conduct the survey to older age groups, but barriers to deeper analysis existed. These barriers were in the online programs designed to aid in surveying. When the programs' survey results came back, the cross analysis in questions and further breakdown was unattainable.

For further research, the questions posed after the interpretation of the results was determined were a more in depth look at the differences in opinion based on gender. Also, if the survey were to be conducted again, clearer definitions of what athletes should do and what they are obligated to do would be presented. In addition, more precise questions would reduce the gray area in athletes having a responsibility to be a role model, while being entitled to a private life. Separate from the initially posed questions, additional categorizing of age groups, genders

and athletic backgrounds should be taken into account. With incorporating both the ways to overcome the limitations and the newly posed questions, the new survey results may vary from the results of this survey.

## REFERENCES

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## **Relationship Survey** **Between Athletes and Role Models**

The survey is to be conducted anonymously and only the information you provide will be used. The survey can be discontinued at anytime if you no longer are willing or able to complete it. The information is being collected and used for research in gaining statistical data in the expressed relationship between athletes and role models. All data and information collected through the surveys will be processed and then destroyed in a proper manner.

### **General Information** (Please check all that apply)

Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_

Age (years): 18-25 \_\_\_\_\_ 26-35 \_\_\_\_\_ 36-45 \_\_\_\_\_ 46-55 \_\_\_\_\_ 56 and above \_\_\_\_\_

### **Survey Questions** (Please check the answer that best depicts your views.)

1. Do you have a role model? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
2. Is your role model an athlete? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
3. Was an athlete your role model when you were younger? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
4. Do you believe athletes are seen as role models to the public? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
5. Do you believe athletes are seen as more of a role model to youth? Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
6. Do you agree or disagree that athletes choose to be in the limelight, thus being a role model comes with a job that requires both a need to acknowledge and act accordingly?  
Agree \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree \_\_\_\_\_
7. Do you agree or disagree that athletes may have chosen their profession, but they are entitled to have a 'private life' and do what they want regardless if people do or do not aspire to them as role models?  
Agree \_\_\_\_\_ Disagree \_\_\_\_\_

*Thank you for your time conducting this survey for the benefit of my research study.  
Your time and honesty are greatly appreciated.*

### **Contact Information:**

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**IRB Administrator** – for concerns about the treatment of human subjects  
Dean Anne Blackhurst AF 115 or (507) 389-2321

## Kaytlin LeMier Bio

Kaytlin M. LeMier will be a Junior at Minnesota State University, Mankato as of the fall of 2008. She is committed to her academics in her Speech Communications major, accompanied by an Urban and Regional Studies minor and a Nonprofit Leadership certificate. Having transferred to MSU in her sophomore year her commitment shined through with a 4.0 grade point average her first year. Her interests lay with the nonprofit field and athletics focused around youth having been an athlete herself. Spending much of her time dedicated to academics she has followed her aspirations by volunteering for the local YMCA in Mankato, and also gains valuable experience through her position as the Head Coach for a YMCA nonprofit program entitled The First Tee in her home town of Eau Claire, WI. Currently Kaytlin is in the midst of becoming a certified First Tee coach, which encompasses a minimum three-year time span. Kaytlin M. LeMier is driven to succeed at her academics and gain valuable experience from working with the communities that surround her. Her research on topics of nonprofits, youth, volunteers and athletics are sure to continue in coming years.